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FM AMEMBASSY AMMAN
TO RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 6001
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2769
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 001658

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FOR NEA/ELA AND NEA/I-POL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/02/2028

TAGS: PREL IZ JO

SUBJECT: GOJ TAKES STEPS TOWARD IRAQ, AND COMMENTARIAT ASKS
"WHO BENEFITS?"

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1668 B. AMMAN 1611 C. AMMAN 1566 D. AMMAN 1460

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale, reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (S/NF) Summary. The King's deep dismay over the absence of an effective, moderate Arab strategy to deal with Iran's manipulation of conflicts in the Arab world has focused him on improving Arab states' relations with Iraq, using Prime Minister Maliki's action against Iranian interests as cause for a positive Arab response. Following a May 22 meeting of his National Security Council which confirmed Jordan's new Iraq strategy, Jordan has announced two public steps: plans to return an ambassador to Baghdad, and an imminent Maliki visit to Amman. Media reaction has been cool. End summary.

Rollout of A New Strategy

¶2. (S/NF) In the wake of Maliki's action against Iranian-backed extremist elements of the Jaysh al-Mahdi, the King sees an opportunity to play an active role to consolidate Maliki's stand against Iranian interests, and draw Iraq closer into a moderate strategy to counter Iranian threats. The King reconfirmed May 22 with his national security team the priority he places on establishing a new, more cooperative relationship with Iraq. The Royal Court then used Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashimi's May 27 visit to release the King's first public remarks about a new strategy. The King is quoted as specifically stressing "the importance of intensifying Arab efforts in support of Iraq and open channels of communication to help preserve the country's unity and sovereignty." He also is said to have expressed keenness to activate economic, political, and commercial ties with Iraq. Foreign Minister Bashir hit the same theme at the May 29 International Compact with Iraq (ICI) Ministerial in Stockholm (where he was the only Arab Foreign Minister in attendance).

¶3. (C) Hashimi's own comments were also intended to signal an improvement in the relationship, with reciprocal steps by the GOI; the Vice President declared, for example, that Iraq is considering re-supplying Jordan with oil at preferential prices. One fly in the ointment was Hashimi's May 28 public criticism of Jordan's new visa requirement for Iraqis, in which he "voiced sorrow" at the GOJ policy and characterized it as a "purely security-related issue that could be solved." Both sides have been presenting this measure as a jointly agreed decision - requested by the GOI - to regularize and simplify Iraqi travel to Jordan, and in fact Hashimi's comment produced an immediate pushback by the GOJ, with an unnamed official reasserting to the media on May 29 that the imposition of visas was upon request of the GOI.

¶4. (C) Immediately following Hashimi's visit, on May 30, the GOJ announced both its anticipation of an expected visit by Maliki and its intention to return an ambassador to Baghdad

"soon." On June 2 FM Bashir told Ambassador that the Maliki visit was planned for June 8 or 9. Note: Embassy Baghdad is hearing June 14. End note.

Chattering Classes See U.S. Fingerprints on a Shift They Question

¶ 15. (SBU) Media reaction to the announcement that Jordan will appoint an ambassador to Iraq has largely been negative, with the usual heavyweight commentators and editors identifying scant benefit to doing so. Many opinion makers refuse to acknowledge any Jordanian interest in enhancing its relationship with Baghdad in the absence of further concessions by Iraq. Some see U.S. partisan interests behind the GOJ decision, with the theme that the Administration is simply looking for success stories to present to the American public. Independent, opposition daily Al-Arab al-Yawm's Managing Editor Fahed Khitan dismissed June 1 the plan as "nothing more than a free-of-charge service for a sectarian government and an American occupation stumbling around in the Iraqi quagmire." In the same paper, senior columnist Nahed Hattar took a similar tack, questioning whether a Jordanian Ambassador in Iraq would serve Jordan's interests, and suggested it would be "part and parcel of the Bush administration's need to improve conditions for Republicans in the next presidential elections, by showing a level of 'normalization' in Iraq ... which will be the ultimate reward that would probably give the neo-conservatives a third term in the White House."

¶ 16. (SBU) Senior Columnist Sultan al-Hattab, writing June 1 in the leading, government-owned Al-Rai, delved more specifically into the question of how and whether Jordan stood to benefit. While noting that the Iraqi Ambassador in Amman "works diligently and loyally to advance the relations as much as he can," he questioned why Jordan was not getting the credit it was due for all the "many services that we provided (Iraq) since the new regime came to power without taking anything in return, not even a thank you." He urged that Jordan's reward for sending an Ambassador should be oil and other interests. Jordan should not "end up paying a price for nothing in return, even if the Americans hate that."

¶ 17. (SBU) Some columnists have endorsed the decision. Hamadeh Faraneh of the daily Al-Ghad argued on June 2 that "the normal situation is for us to have an ambassador in Baghdad, and the abnormal situation is not to....How could foreign countries have accredited ambassadors in Iraq while we, who have ties and interests more than those of all the others, do not have anyone to represent us there?" He equated further delay with sacrificing Jordanian interests to "Al-Qaida and the extremists who have denied Jordan and other Arab countries of having an actual presence in Iraq." Columnist and former information minister Saleh Qallab wrote on June 2 in Al-Rai that "the only party that does not want Arab and non-Arab embassies in Baghdad is Iran.... It is a real political battle, and all the Arabs are supposed to reopen their embassies and diplomatic missions in Baghdad in order to inform the Iraqi government that it is not alone or targeted and that it has Arab support."

Comment

¶ 18. (S) The new Jordanian strategy towards Iraq reflects both the positive developments on the ground (ref A) and determined engagement by post and senior USG visitors to drive home the meaning of these developments (refs B-D). The King seems determined to pursue this new path but faces skepticism of Iraqi intentions both from the public (as evidenced by the negative editorializing) and from some elements of his own national security team. Post will continue to engage the GOJ to encourage it to stick with its new approach and to prepare effectively for a successful Maliki visit marked by conciliatory and forward-looking

statements and deliverables. In addition, to support Jordan practically in returning an ambassador, Embassies Baghdad and Amman are arranging for an Embassy Baghdad team to brief key members of the GOJ interagency on June 5 on facilities, security measures, and areas in which the USG can be helpful.

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Hale